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THE KING
A MORALITY
BY PADRAIC PEARSE

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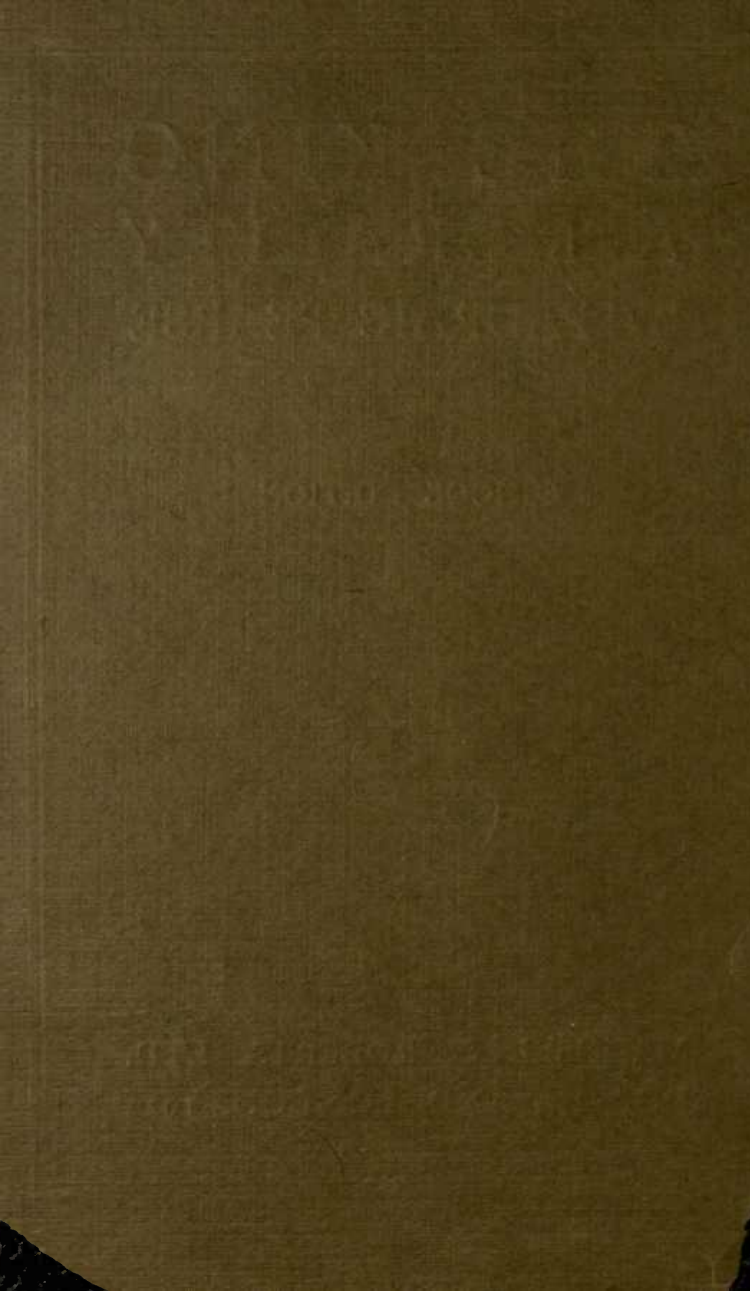


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DUBLIN AND LONDON, 1922



THE KING
A MORALITY
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CHARACTERS

GIOLLA NA NAOMH (*"the Servant
of the Saints"*), a Little Boy

Boys

AN ABBOT

MONKS

A KING

HEROES

GILLIES

WOMEN

PLACE—*An ancient monastery*

THE KING

A green before the monastery. The voices of monks are heard chanting. Through the chanting breaks the sound of a trumpet. A little boy runs out from the monastery and stands on the green looking in the direction whence the trumpet has spoken.

THE BOY. Conall, Diarmaid, Giolla na Naomh !

The voices of other boys answer him.

FIRST BOY. There is a host marching from the North.

SECOND BOY. Where is it ?

FIRST BOY. See it beneath you in the glen.

THIRD BOY. It is the King's host.

FOURTH BOY. The King is going to battle.

The trumpet speaks again, nearer. The boys go upon the rampart of the monastery. The murmur of a marching host is heard.

FIRST BOY. I see the horses and the riders.

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SECOND BOY. I see the swords and the spears.

FOURTH BOY. I see the standards and the banners.

THIRD BOY. I see the King's banner.

FOURTH BOY. I see the King !

FIRST BOY. Which of them is the King ?

FOURTH BOY. The tall comely man on the black horse.

GIOLLA NA NAOMH. Let us salute the King.

THE BOYS *(with the voice of one)*. Take victory in battle and slaying, O King !

The voices of warriors are heard acclaiming the King as the host marches past with din of weapons and music of trumpet and pipes. Silence succeeds.

FIRST BOY. I would like to be a King.

GIOLLA NA NAOMH. Why ?

FIRST BOY. The King has gold and silver.

SECOND BOY. He has noble jewels in his jewel-house.

THIRD BOY. He has slender steeds and gallant hounds.

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FOURTH BOY. He has a keen-edged, gold-hilted sword and a mighty-shafted, blue-headed spear and a glorious red-emblazoned shield. I saw him once in my father's house.

FIRST BOY. What was he like ?

FOURTH BOY. He was tall and noble. He was strong and broad-shouldered. He had long fair hair. He had a comely proud face. He had two piercing grey eyes. A white vest of satin next his skin. A very beautiful red tunic, with a white hood, upon his body. A royal mantle of purple about him. Seven colours upon him, between vest and tunic and hood and mantle. A silver brooch upon his breast. A kingly diadem upon his head, and the colour of gold upon it. Two great wings rising above his head, as white as the two wings of a sea-gull and as broad as the two wings of an eagle. He was a gallant man.

SECOND BOY. And what was the look of his face ?

THIRD BOY. Did he look angry, stern ?

FOURTH BOY. He did, at times.

FIRST BOY. Had he a laughing look ?

FOURTH BOY. He laughed only once.

THE KING

SECOND BOY. How did he look mostly ? Stern or laughing ?

FOURTH BOY. He looked sorrowful. When he was talking to the kings and the heroes he had an angry and a laughing look every second while, but when he was silent he was sorrowful.

FIRST BOY. What sorrow can he have ?

FOURTH BOY. I do not know. The thousands he has slain, perhaps.

SECOND BOY. The churches he has plundered.

THIRD BOY. The battles he has lost.

GIOLLA NA NAOMH. Alas, the poor King !

SECOND BOY. You would not like to be a King, Giolla na Naomh ?

GIOLLA NA NAOMH. I would not. I would rather be a monk that I might pray for the King.

FOURTH BOY. I may have the kingship of this country when I am a man, for my father is of the royal blood.

SECOND BOY. And my father is of the royal blood, too.

THIRD BOY. Aye, and mine.

FOURTH BOY. I will not let the kingdom go with either of you. It is mine !

THE KING

SECOND BOY. It is not, but mine

THIRD BOY. It matters not whose it is, for *I* will have it!

SECOND BOY. No, nor anyone of your house!

FOURTH BOY (*seizing a switch of sally and brandishing it*). I will ply the venom of my sword upon you! I will defend my kingdom against my enemies! Giolla na Naomh, pray for the King!

A bell sounds from the monastery.

GIOLLA NA NAOMH. The bell is ringing.

The people of the monastery come upon the green in ones and twos, the Abbot last. The boys gather a little apart. Distant sounds of battle are heard.

THE ABBOT. My children, the King is giving battle to his foes.

FIRST MONK. This King has lost every battle into which he has gone up to this.

THE ABBOT. In a vision that I saw last night as I knelt before my God it was revealed to me that the battle will be broken on the King again.

SECOND MONK. My grief!

THIRD MONK. My grief!

THE KING

FIRST MONK. Tell us, Father, the cause of these unnumbered defeats.

THE ABBOT. Do you think that an offering will be accepted from polluted hands? This King has shed the blood of the innocent. He has made spoils and forays. He has oppressed the poor. He has forsaken the friendship of God and made friends with evil-doers.

FIRST MONK. That is true. Yet it is a good fight that the King fights now, for he gives battle for his people.

THE ABBOT. It is an angel that should be sent to pour out the wine and to break the bread of this sacrifice. Not by an unholy King should the noble wine that is in the veins of good heroes be spilt; not at the behest of a guilty king should fair bodies be mangled. I say to you that the offering will not be accepted.

FIRST MONK. And are all guilty of the sins of the King? If the King is defeated it's grief will be for all. Why must all suffer for the sins of the King? On the King the eric!

THE ABBOT. The nation is guilty of the sins of its princes. I say to you that this

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nation shall not be freed until it chooses for itself a righteous King.

SECOND MONK. Where shall a righteous King be found?

THE ABBOT. I do not know, unless he be found among these little boys.

The boys have drawn near and are gathered about the Abbot.

FIRST MONK. And shall the people be in bondage until these little lads are fit for battle? It is not the King's case I pity, but the case of the people. I heard women mourning last night. Shall women be mourning in this land till doom?

THIRD MONK. As I went out from the monastery yesterday there was a dead man on the verge of the wood. Battle is terrible.

SECOND MONK. No, battle is glorious! While we were singing our None but now, Father, I heard, through the psalmody of the brethren, the voice of a trumpet. My heart leaped, and I would fain have risen from the place where I was and gone after that gallant music. I should not have cared though it were to my death I went.

THE ABBOT. That is the voice of a young man. The old wait for death, but the

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young go to meet it. If into this quiet place, where monks chant and children play, there were to come from yonder battle-field a bloodstained man, calling upon all to follow him into the battle-press, there is none here that would not rise and follow him, but I myself and the old brother that rings our bell. There is none of you, young brothers, no, nor any of these little lads, that would not rise from me and go into the battle. That music of the fighters makes drunk the hearts of young men.

SECOND MONK. It is good for young men to be made drunk.

FIRST MONK. Brother, you speak wickedness.

THE ABBOT. There is a heady ale which all young men should drink, for he who has not been made drunk with it has not lived. It is with that ale that God makes drunk the hearts of the saints. I would not forbid you your intoxication, O young men!

FIRST MONK. This is not plain, Father.

THE ABBOT. Do you think if that terrible, beautiful voice for which young men strain their ears were to speak from yon place where the fighters are, and the horses, and

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the music, that I would stay you, did ye rise to obey it? Do you think I would grudge any of you? Do you think I would grudge the dearest of these little boys, to death calling with that terrible, beautiful voice? I would let you all go, though I and the old brother should be very lonely here.

SECOND BOY. Giolla na Naomh would not go, Father.

THE ABBOT. Why do you say that?

SECOND BOY. He said that he would rather be a monk.

THE ABBOT. Would you not go into the battle, Giolla na Naomh?

GIOLLA NA NAOMH. I would. I would go as a gilly to the King, that I might serve him when all would forsake him.

THE ABBOT. But it is to the saints you are gilly, Giolla na Naomh, and not to the King.

GIOLLA NA NAOMH. It were not much for the poor King to have one little gilly that would not forsake him when the battle would be broken on him and all forsaking him.

THE ABBOT. This child is right. While we think of glory he thinks of service.

*An outcry as of grief and dismay is heard
from the battlefield.*

THE KING

FIRST MONK. I fear me that the King is beaten !

THE ABBOT. Go upon the rampart and tell us what you see.

FIRST MONK (*having gone upon the rampart*). A man comes towards us in flight.

SECOND MONK. What manner of man is he ?

FIRST MONK. A bloodstained man, all spent, his feet staggering and stumbling under him.

SECOND MONK. Is he a man of the King's people ?

FIRST MONK. He is.

A soldier comes upon the green all spent.

THE SOLDIER. The King is beaten !

THE MONKS. My sorrow, my sorrow !

THE SOLDIER. The King is beaten, I say to you ! O ye of the books and the bells, small was your help to us in the hard battle ! The King is beaten !

THE ABBOT. Where is the King ?

THE SOLDIER. He is flying.

THE ABBOT. Give us the description of the battle.

THE SOLDIER. I cannot speak. Let a drink be given to me.

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THE ABBOT. Let a drink be given to this man.

The little boy who is called Giolla na Naomh gives him a drink of water.

THE ABBOT. Speak to us now and give us the description of the battle.

THE SOLDIER. Each man of us was a fighter of ten. The King was a fighter of a hundred. But what availed us our valour? We were beaten and we fled. Hundreds lie sole to sole on the lea.

THE MONKS. My sorrow ! My sorrow !
A din grows.

SECOND MONK. Who comes?

FIRST MONK. The King !

Riders and gillies come upon the green pell-mell, the King in their midst. The King goes upon his knees before the Abbot, and throws his sword upon the ground.

THE KING. Give me your curse, O man of God, and let me go to my death ! I am beaten. My people are beaten. Ten battles have I fought against my foes, and every battle of them has been broken on me. It is I who have brought God's wrath upon this land. Ask your God not to wreak his

THE KING

anger on my people henceforth, but to wreak it on me. Have pity on my people, O man of God !

THE ABBOT. God will have pity on them.

THE KING. God has forsaken me.

THE ABBOT. You have forsaken God.

THE KING. God has forsaken my people.

THE ABBOT. He has not, neither will He. He will save this nation if it choose a righteous King.

THE KING. Give it then a righteous King. Give it one of your monks or one of these little lads to be its King. The battle on your protection, O man of God !

THE ABBOT. Not so, but on the protection of the sword of a righteous King. Speak to me, my children, and tell me who among you is the most righteous ?

FIRST MONK. I have sinned.

SECOND MONK. And I.

THIRD MONK. Father, we have all sinned.

THE ABBOT. I, too, have sinned. All that are men have sinned. How soon we exchange the wisdom of children for the folly of men ! O wise children, busy with your toys while we are busy with our sins ! I see clearly now. I shall find a sinless

THE KING

King among these little boys. Speak to me, boys, and tell me who is most innocent among you ?

THE BOYS (*with one voice*). Giolla na Naomh.

THE ABBOT. The little lad that waits upon all ! Ye are right. The last shall be first. Giolla na Naomh, will you be King over this nation ?

GIOLLA NA NAOMH. I am too young, Father, I am too weak.

THE ABBOT. Come hither to me, child. (*The child goes over to him.*) O fosterling that I have nourished, if I ask this thing of you, will you not do it ?

GIOLLA NA NAOMH. I will be obedient to you, Father.

THE ABBOT. Will you turn your face into the battle ?

GIOLLA NA NAOMH. I will do the duty of a King.

THE ABBOT. Little one, it may be that your death will come of it.

GIOLLA NA NAOMH. Welcome is death if it be appointed to me.

THE ABBOT. Did I not say that the young seek death ? They are spendthrift

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of all that we hoard jealously ; they pursue all that we shun. The terrible, beautiful voice has spoken to this child. O herald death, you shall be answered ! I will not grudge you my fosterling.

THE KING. Abbot, I will fight my own battles : no child shall die for me !

THE ABBOT. You have given me your sword, and I give it to this child. God has spoken through the voice of His ancient herald, the terrible, beautiful voice that comes out of the heart of battles.

GIOLLA NA NAOMH. Let me do this little thing, King. I will guard your banner well. I will bring you back your sword after the battle. I am only your little gilly, who watches while the tired King sleeps. I will sleep to-night while you shall watch.

THE KING. My pity, my three pities !

GIOLLA NA NAOMH. We slept last night while you were marching through the dark country. Poor King, your marchings have been long. My march will be very short.

THE ABBOT. Let this gentle asking prevail with you, King. I say to you that God has spoken.

THE KING. I do not understand your God.

THE KING

THE ABBOT. Who understands Him? He demands not understanding, but obedience. This child is obedient, and because he is obedient, God will do mighty things through him. King, you must yield to this.

THE KING. I yield, I yield! Woe is me that I did not fall in yonder onset!

THE ABBOT. Let this child be stripped that the raiment of a King may be put about him. (*The child is stripped of his clothing.*) Let a royal vest be put next the skin of the child. (*A royal vest is put upon him.*) Let a royal tunic be put about him. (*A royal tunic is put about him above the vest, and sandals upon his feet.*) Let the royal mantle be put about him. (*The King takes off the royal mantle and it is put upon the child.*) Let a royal diadem be put upon his head. (*The King takes off the royal diadem and it is put upon the child's head.*) Let him be given the shield of the King. (*The shieldbearer holds up the shield.*) A blessing on this shield! May it be firm against foes!

THE HEROES. A blessing on this shield!
The shield is put on the child's left arm.

THE ABBOT. Let him be given the spear of the King. (*The spearbearer comes forward*

THE KING

and holds up the spear.) A blessing on this spear! May it be sharp against foes!

THE HEROES. A blessing on this spear!

THE ABBOT. Let him be given the sword of the King. (*The King lifts his sword and girds it round the child's waist. Giolla na Naomh draws the sword and holds it in his right hand.*) A blessing on this sword! May it be hard to smite foes!

THE HEROES. A blessing on this sword!

THE ABBOT. I call this little lad King, and I put the battle under his protection in the name of God.

THE KING (*kneeling before the boy*). I do homage to thee, O King, and I put the battle under thy protection.

THE HEROES, MONKS, BOYS, etc. (*kneeling*). We do homage to thee, O King, and we put the battle under thy protection.

GIOLLA NA NAOMH. I undertake to sustain the battle in the name of God.

THE ABBOT. Let a steed be brought him. (*A steed is brought.*) Let the banner of the King be unfurled. (*The banner is unfurled.*) Turn thy face to the battle, O King!

GIOLLA NA NAOMH (*kneeling*). Bless me, Father.

THE KING

THE ABBOT. A blessing on thee, little one.

THE HEROES, etc. (*with one voice*). Take victory in battle and slaying, O King.

The little King mounts, and, with the heroes and soldiers and gillies, rides to the battle. The Abbot, the King, the Monks, and the Boys watch them.

THE ABBOT. King, I have given you the noblest jewel that was in my house. I loved yonder child.

THE KING. Priest, I have never received from my tributary kings a kinglier gift.

FIRST MONK. They have reached the place of battle.

THE ABBOT. O strong God, make strong the hand of this child. Make firm his foot. Make keen his sword. Let the purity of his heart and the humbleness of his spirit be unto him a magnifying of courage and an exaltation of mind. Ye angels that fought the ancient battles, ye veterans of God, make a battle-pen about him and fight before him with flaming swords.

THE MONKS AND BOYS. Amen, Amen.

THE ABBOT. O God, save this nation by the sword of the sinless boy.

THE KING. And O Christ, that was

THE KING

crucified on the hill, bring the child safe from the perilous battle.

THE ABBOT. King, King, freedom is not purchased but with a great price. (*A trumpet speaks.*) Let the description of the battle be given us.

The First Monk and the Second Monk go upon the rampart.

FIRST MONK. The two hosts are face to face. *Another trumpet speaks.*

SECOND MONK. That is sweet ! It is the trumpet of the King ! *Shouts.*

FIRST MONK. The King's host raises shouts. *Other shouts.*

SECOND MONK. The enemy answers them.

FIRST MONK. The hosts advance against each other.

SECOND MONK. They fight.

FIRST MONK. Our people are yielding.

THIRD MONK. Say not so.

SECOND MONK. My grief, they are yielding. *A trumpet speaks.*

THIRD MONK. Sweet again ! It is timely spoken, O trumpet of the King !

FIRST MONK. The King's banner is going into the battle !

SECOND MONK. I see the little King !

THE KING

THIRD MONK. Is he going into the battle?

FIRST MONK. Yes.

THE MONKS AND BOYS (*with one voice*).
Take victory in battle and slaying, O King!

SECOND MONK. It is a good fight now.

FIRST MONK. Two seas have met on the plain.

SECOND MONK. Two raging seas!

FIRST MONK. One sea rolls back.

SECOND MONK. It is the enemy that retreats!

FIRST MONK. The little King goes through them.

SECOND MONK. He goes through them like a hawk through small birds.

FIRST MONK. Yea, like a wolf through a flock of sheep on a plain.

SECOND MONK. Like a torrent through a mountain gap.

FIRST MONK. It is a road of rout before him.

SECOND MONK. There are great uproars in the battle. It is a roaring path down which the King rides.

FIRST MONK. O golden head above the slaughter! O shining, terrible sword of the King!

THE KING

SECOND MONK. The enemy flies!

FIRST MONK. They are beaten! They are beaten! It is a red road of rout! Raise shouts of exultation!

SECOND MONK. My grief!

FIRST MONK. My grief! My grief!

THE ABBOT. What is that?

FIRST MONK. The little King is down!

THE ABBOT. Has he the victory?

FIRST MONK. Yes, but he himself is down. I do not see his golden head. I do not see his shining sword. My grief! They raise his body from the plain.

THE ABBOT. Is the enemy flying?

SECOND MONK. Yes, they fly. They are pursued. They are scattered. They are scattered as a mist would be scattered. They are no longer seen on the plain.

THE ABBOT. It's thanks to God! (*Keening is heard.*) Thou hast been answered, O terrible voice! Old herald, my foster child has answered!

THIRD MONK. They bear hither a dead child.

THE KING. He said that he would sleep to-night and that I should watch.

Heroes come upon the green bearing the body of Giolla na Naomh on a bier; there

THE KING

are women keening it. The bier is laid in the centre of the green.

THE KING. He has brought me back my sword. He has guarded my banner well.

THE ABBOT (*lifting the sword from the bier*). Take the sword.

THE KING. No, I will let him keep it. A King should sleep with a sword. This was a very valiant King. (*He takes the sword from the Abbot and lays it again upon the bier. He kneels.*) I do homage to thee, O dead King, O victorious child! I kiss thee, O white body, since it is thy purity that hath redeemed my people. (*He kisses the forehead of Giolla na Naomh. They commence to keen again.*)

THE ABBOT. Do not keen this child, for he hath purchased freedom for his people. Let shouts of exultation be raised and let a canticle be sung in praise of God.

The body is borne into the monastery with a Te Deum.

THE SCENE CLOSES.

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